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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0542
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2396
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0006
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2802
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2185
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000038

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND SCA/PPD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KG](#)

SUBJECT: Local Kyrgyz Election Coverage Far From Fair and Balanced
REFTEL: Bishkek 1400

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. (SBU) Summary: As part of the Embassy's election monitoring program, a Democracy Commission grant was awarded to a local NGO to study the use of broadcast and print media in the run-up to the December 21 parliamentary elections. The results were unsurprising.

The results confirm the trend over the past year of a decrease in freedom of the press in Kyrgyzstan, not by outright censorship, but by limiting opposition voices to those outlets and times when they are least likely to be heard. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Television is the preferred medium in Kyrgyzstan. Most people get their news from television and it is the only medium which reaches all regions of this mountainous country. The four stations monitored during this election campaign were: KTR (state-owned channel whose president is directly appointed by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, viewed by 77% of the population), NTS (majority Russian-owned channel which is very careful not to ruffle feathers, particularly after the previous owners were bought out after siding too closely with the opposition in November 2006, and mostly rebroadcasts Russia's Channel One, viewed by 46% of the population), NBT (Kazakh-owned channel that is the most independent in its reporting and comments, though at times self-censored, viewed by 45% of the population), and Pyramida (formerly independent channel which had a recent, mysterious change of ownership and has now grown largely silent on political issues, viewed by 39% of the population).

¶3. (SBU) KTR is the only station with the technical capability to broadcast nationwide, and it is the Kyrgyz station with the largest viewership. It allotted free airtime to each of the parties, but the free time was after 23:00, when it was unlikely to reach a wide audience. Two state newspapers, Slovo Kyrgyzstana and Kyrgyz-Tuusu (Russian and Kyrgyz-language, respectively) likewise granted free print space, though only once and only about a quarter of a page. In the weeks preceding the elections, the state-owned newspapers, like most other newspapers, turned into unabashed propaganda machines, devoting front-page headlines and glowing articles to Ak

Jol, the President's party.

¶4. (SBU) Of paid political advertisements on KTR, the most airtime (20% of all paid advertisements) was purchased by the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK). However, money spent by SDPK and other opposition parties on KTR airtime may not have had the expected bang for the buck. Three parties - Asaba, SDPK, and Ata Meken - filed suit against KTR for refusing to sell them prime time in violation of the election code, which prescribes equal access to state-owned media. The Director of KTR, Melis Eshimkanov, conveniently out sick in the run-up to the elections, left his deputy, Ernis Kiyazov, to take the heat. KTR publicly explained that Ak Jol purchased all prime time advertising slots "two months ago." Opposition parties complained that KTR only aired their ads from 11pm to 5am. (Comment: The specificity of two months is interesting, because it not only predates the official campaign period, but it also predates the creation of Ak Jol and the announcement of parliamentary elections. End comment)

¶5. (SBU) News programs on all four monitored channels likewise failed to provide fair and balanced coverage of the election campaign. Not surprisingly, coverage of President Bakiyev's party, Ak Jol, was 96.3% positive on KTR (out of 1,056 seconds of coverage during the monitoring period). The main opposition party, Ata Meken, received 100% negative coverage on KTR (all 216 seconds were negative). Erkin Kyrgyzstan Party (ERK) also received 100% negative coverage (18 seconds).

¶6. (SBU) In the twenty-four hours prior to the elections, when campaigning and advertisement were officially forbidden, KTR broadcast "news" which discussed Ak Jol in a positive light.. Likewise, National Radio aired a live program with President Bakiyev, in which he extolled the virtues of the Ak Jol party. This thinly-veiled propaganda subtly violated the election code proscription on campaigning twenty-four hours prior to the

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elections.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: KTR is, if not the only game in town, the only station that reaches all areas of Kyrgyzstan. Since advertisement on KTR is astonishingly cheap by Western standards (currently \$90.00 for a 30-second segment during prime time), and with few other options for reaching a wide audience, it is not surprising that Kyrgyz political parties jockeyed for prime time during the election campaign. In a meeting with KTR Director Eshimkanov prior to the elections (REFTEL), he spoke honestly about the pressures he was under but promised to aggressively protect independent voices. Sadly, he failed to uphold that promise and let KTR become a de facto mouthpiece for Ak Jol.

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